

Air And Light The Antidote For Offices' Built-In Artifice

By Coco McCabe, Globe Correspondent, 11/23/03

"Oh no," said my neighbor in the cube near mine. "They shut the door."

With a click of the latch, the daylight was gone.

It hadn't been much of a view, just a sliver of sky spied through a window in a private office beyond the bank of cubes where we sat. But it was a link to the outdoors, a way to keep our bearings in a room filled with processed air and artificial light.

When I took the job, I had worried about this part of office life - being sealed in like leftovers in a Ziploc bag.

But as a new member of the windowless class, I have to ask: What were the architects thinking? Why aren't there more windows for the workers?

It's not just office buildings that suffer from this defect of modern life. In the town where I live we paid millions of dollars for a new, mostly windowless high school. An imposing edifice, it came with a polished architects' rap. It was designed, they said, to evoke New England history and Shaker farming traditions. That sounded so wholesome, like fresh air and sunshine.

Poor kids. It was a trick. Corralled behind acres of brick, they catch only occasional glimpses of the daylight outdoors.

A few towns north stands a perfect model for what's possible: a simple white meeting house built in 1785. Tall windows wrap the building in two bands of light, one upstairs, the other down. Inside, the sanctuary glows. And it makes me wonder: Why should interior daylight be only an 18th-century luxury?

One day at work I overheard two people passing in the corridor. One was coming deep from the core of the building, the other returning to it. But their mission was the same: They both needed to visit the window. It was a natural urge.

This window is wide and arched, a wall's worth of glass standing at one end of a cube-packed floor. It doesn't open, of course, but the light floods in, washing the floor and ceiling nearby with the mood of the moment - brooding, bright, whatever the weather and the hour hold.

People linger there. They think of chores to do at that spot. They hold impromptu conferences. It's a restorative place. That's what windows do. They are an elixir for much of what ails us - grumpiness, claustrophobia, indecision, even career blues.

At home, a year's worth of seasons on an empty marsh fill a page of one of our photo albums. The pictures were shot from a window in an old house we rented at the end of an apple orchard. The house was dark and still inside, a constant reminder of the pace of our careers.

My husband snapped the pictures from his desk beneath that window the year he launched himself as a freelance writer. Not much happened, job-wise, those long months on the marsh. But the window kept him content at his desk each day. He could look out and study the grasses and cattails as they slowly turned with the seasons from green to furry brown and finally frozen white.

That narrow window framed his future. It helped him to be patient and calm. Success came eventually.

I think of the jobs I've had over the years and rate them now, in hindsight, by the windows they came with. One of the best was in a small newspaper office on the ground floor of an industrial building. Not only did I have a door that I could open and close, I had a window that I was in control of, too. Control is key.

The window was small, like the kind at a drive-through joint, just big enough for sliding open and shoving out the burgers and fries. Mine could have used a little grease (the window, I mean). The salt in the air made it jerk along in its aluminum track, but I opened it often, not just to let the air in, but the community, too. Some people found it more convenient to slip their news on scraps of paper through the window rather than deposit them in the jumble of items at the front desk. I liked that immediate link with my corner of the world.

More than news passed by that window. It was at a time in life when friends were starting families - a transition I was ambivalent about. How would I manage a baby? Easy, they said, tapping on the window to get my attention. I'd turn, and there would be one of the babies bouncing in its mother's arms. The window campaign worked. I finally decided I had to have one of those bobbing babies, too. True, it meant giving up my command center in the industrial building. But I was ready for a change.

Not every window in my working life had offered such happy connections. The worst had been in a grimy office on the main drag of a town that was slowly dying. I was a newspaper reporter there, which meant my hours often stretched to midnight and beyond. The windows were huge but permanently yellowed from the clouds of cigarette smoke exhaled by previous occupants. Even the sunlight looked grubby after forcing its way through those panes in the morning. Dusty Venetian blinds, folded at mad angles, hung part way down, ready to drop and shut out the world.

The problem was I rarely remembered that task - lowering the blinds to discourage the voyeurs - and I paid the price more than once. Midnight flashers loved that fishbowl office. I'd look up and there one would be, prancing and ghostly in the dark beyond the smoky windows. I called the cops once, but what could they do? Tell me not to look? Too late.

It's humanly impossible not to look out a window if one is there, and it's absurd there aren't more of them. Modern conveniences such as fluorescent light and central air are no substitute for the real things. They just confuse you: Is it day, or night? Hot or cold? How would you ever know without a window?

Winter is closing in now. Daylight is in short supply - it hasn't come when I get up, and it's gone when I get home. I wouldn't mind it fading, if I only had a window from which to watch it go.

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